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Performing curiosity: re-viewing women's domestic embroidery in seventeenth-century England

Introduction

“Thinking with things” has become an established approach as the ‘material turn’ has enriched disciplines as varied as literature and languages, geography, history and theology.¹ However, as Diarmaid MacCulloch has observed in relation to picturesque objects and the archaeology of the history of ideas, some objects are more difficult to “think with” than others. Such things may become “relegated to the intellectual margins” but still “deserve our serious consideration in understanding the past”.² This paper engages with a group of things which have proved particularly awkward. At one level they are simple to categorise as elaborate and expensive pictorial embroideries made by affluent and aspirational schoolgirls and women at home in a particularly English style of embroidery which was at its height – quite literally – in the mid- to late seventeenth century and then dramatically dropped out of fashion.³ Developing such embroidery skills was essential to demonstrate the capacity to become a ‘goodly and godly’ woman so these are objects imbued with moral agency as evidence of “industry” and “piety”.⁴ Typically worked to create highly textured, dimensional and dense but reflective surfaces using glistening metal and silk threads, sequins, pearls, semi-precious stones and colourful glass beads, these often depict compressed Biblical, classical or allegorical narratives surrounded by lively representations of real and mythical flora and fauna. At another level, they are frustratingly enigmatic. Several thousand of these embroideries survive with a remarkably similar range of subjects and many motifs repeated with minor if significant variations.⁵ The originality which gives these embroideries their energy and individuality lies in the stitched interpretation of the familiar design elements derived from the print sources and pattern books, repeatedly translated on to fabric by pattern drawers.⁶ Their place in the archaeology of ideas is as unclear as their place in the archaeology of the home. They have left singularly few direct traces in visual and textual records. Their exuberant materiality proved challenging to the tastes of succeeding generations. Unfashionable throughout the eighteenth century and despised in the nineteenth, they seem to have been inherited and preserved by women as memorials of their female ancestors and only emerged from attics and cupboards to enter the market place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷

Mirroring such invisibility, these embroideries have only recently been considered a suitable subject for serious academic study to be seen as material artefacts which have the potential to enable new insights into the social and cultural life of early modern women. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, textile specialists routinely considered such embroidery unacceptable, outlandish and even comic. May Morris, a serious and informed embroidery practitioner and historian, described it as “riotous nonsense ... joyously absurd ... one could forgive its incoherence and treat it as a mere joke were it not the waste of labour in those interminably fine lace stitches”.⁸ The names used to describe this embroidery style have not helped as the contemporaneous terms “curious work” or “embossed work” were superseded by the term “stumpwork”.⁹ As late as 1984, Rosalind Mitchison noted in her review of Rozsika Parker’s ground-breaking study *The Subversive Stitch*¹⁰ that “[s]tump-work pictures stand totally free of any subservience to perspective or scale, but are of limited aesthetic value. They seem to have suffered from a horror of unadorned space, and also from visual clichés”.¹¹ Initial studies sought to frame such embroidery within the art-historical tradition, almost invariably to its detriment. As Mitchison’s comment demonstrates, “curious work” then becomes viewed as a type of failed – and rather unattractive – needle-painting.¹² More recent scholarship has sought to situate such raised work as proto-feminist, establishing the needle as the equivalent of the pen

and frame the embroideries as ways of reading contemporaneous religious and political beliefs, evidence of female engagement with a century of turbulent change in government and faith.¹³ Whilst not discounting the valuable insights gained through these methodologies, this paper takes a distinct and novel approach, situating this specifically female “curious work” within the framework of the broader concept and practice of curiosity in early modern England. It uses the multiple, sometimes contradictory, and highly gendered concept of “the curious” to provide a new way of viewing the making of “curious works” and understanding its place in the lives of the makers and their homes as the performance of curiosity. An historical archaeology approach enables the scattered but rich textual evidence in the form of contemporary definitions of the curious and its applications, coupled with the occasional references to embroidery in diaries, poems and fiction, to provide a fresh perspective on this significant body of deracinated material culture. Mary Beaudry, in her fascinating study of the cultural significance of sewing tools, points out that this methodology is particularly pertinent to gendered artefacts and activities, noting it can “remedy the silences of finds analysis by seeking out objects that have not been studied because they were deemed trivial for the very reason that they were associated with women’s domestic activities”.¹⁴ Historical archaeology can thus illuminate issues of social status and identity to reveal the “life histories of the objects that archaeologists find otherwise mute or mysterious and strangely distant”.¹⁵ This paper shares Beaudry’s goal of finding “better ways of making fine-grained distinctions within seemingly homogenous categories of artifacts” by examining this specific style of gendered embroidery through the “lens of curiosity” which Alexander Marr has observed is “a legitimate tool with which to assess the rich interconnections between early modern objects, texts, individuals and ideas”.¹⁶

Curious minds, curious works

Early modern interpretations of the story of Lot’s wife provide a helpful starting point, drawing together attitudes to female curiosity and a specific example of “curious work”.

The single sentence “But his wife looked backe from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt” (Genesis 19, 26; King James Bible 1611 translation) was routinely glossed as a warning exemplar to women of the consequences of transgressive curiosity, disobedience and inherent weakness in sustaining faithfulness. The Oxford scholar Zachary Bogan (1625-1659) explicitly identified curiosity as the cause of Lot’s wife’s punishment, arguing:

Curiosity in humane things, hath been an occasion of many sad accidents. Lot’s wife out of curiosity to observe & gaze upon the destruction of Sodom (contrary to the) Angel’s command (v: 17) stealing a time when her husband did not see her, looked back from behind him, and was presently turned into a pillar of salt.¹⁷

He repeated this charge stressing how “Lot’s wife was to blame indeed, for her curiosity...”.¹⁸ Even women as independently minded as the Puritan author and translator Lucy Hutchinson (1620-1681) internalised this dominant judgement.¹⁹ Her poem *Order and Disorder* (1679) describes Lot’s wife’s exemplary function in curbing female curiosity:

But for example to her sex remained,
Teaching how curious minds should be restrained
And kept within the Lord’s prescribed bound
Which none e’er passed but swift destruction found.²⁰

Hutchinson did, however, add a vividly chilling account of the errant wife’s transformation into the pillar of salt as she looked back covetously at the riches of her lost home but hinting at an attempt at redemption. The rapidly crystallising woman is described trying to turn her head to look away from Sodom but remaining fixed in her backward-looking stance:

A sudden horror all her blood congealed
 Her lips and cheeks their lively colour lost
 Her members hardened with death's chilling frost;
 Her hands grew stiff, her feet stuck to the ground;
 Striving to cry, her voice no passage found.
 She would have turned her looks away from thence,
 But, to inform us what was her offence,
 Her disobedience in her posture shown.
 Her neck as stiff as other parts was grown,
 Thus she, a lasting statue of hard salt,
 Became the monument of her own fault...²¹

[Figure 1 and Figure 2 here – side by side]

As befits an embroidery worked by a girl or woman in the early to mid-seventeenth century, this transformation from body to pillar is placed at the centre of the piece (Figure 1).²² This piece of epitomises many of the qualities of “curious work”. The oblong embroidery has no obvious practical function although it is imbued with material morality. Lavish use has been made of complex flat and coiled silver and silver-gilt metal and silk threads, worked on a cream silk satin ground fabric which is further ornamented with coral beads, pearls and sequins. Techniques include padded raised work sections and appliqué and plied-up dense layers of metal work to form Lot's wife as a salt pillar which would once have scintillated in the light. Contrasting this with the depiction of the same transformative moment in the source illustration from Gerard de Jode's *Thesaurus Sacrarum Historiarum Veteris Testamenti* (1585) is instructive (Figure 2).²³ The painterly, hand-coloured engraving centres on the anguished expressions of Lot and his daughters as they flee, helped by angels, while Lot's wife is in the far upper right corner. In both representations, smoke from the burning city fills the sky but it billows and threatens far more effectively when worked in raised metal threads. The embroidery, however, is filled with other elements in a seemingly disconcerting variety of scales and a dizzying irrelevance to the dramatic story. These can distract modern viewers from the emotional tension conveyed in the minute working of the distraught faces. The elaborate clouds dropping rain, gushing fountain, large birds and awkwardly placed bridge of the embroidery, placed within a border crammed with animals and flowers, contrast with the controlled, clear narrative of the engraving. The print and the embroidery have an obvious visual commonality despite their significant variations and a shared engagement with the consequences of uncontrolled curiosity but relate to very different and gendered traditions of making, viewing and value.

Changing ideas of curiosity

As scholars have pointed out, the attribute of curiosity had a mixed reputation in the early modern period.²⁴ Queen Elizabeth I translated Plutarch's *De curiositate* which condemned curiosity as immoderate and uncontrolled, a social and moral offence – “an encroaching, a debauching and denuding of secret things”.²⁵ Worse yet, in *Ratio Verae Theologiae* (1518), Erasmus modelled misdirected curiosity as a potential failure of faith, warning against *impia curiositas* (“unholy curiosity”) rather than *pia curiositas* (“holy curiosity”).²⁶ Despite a growing acceptance of curiosity's ability to challenge and discover as well as to unsettle and disrupt, attitudes towards curiosity remained ambivalent as improper curiosity increasingly became modelled as a specifically female failing. Henry Holland (1556–1603), preacher at Saint Brides Church, London, identified “curiositie” as a sin of both Adam and Eve because

they sought “after strange knowledge, not contented with God’s holy word”.²⁷ Another clergyman, Elnathan Parr (1577-1622) ranked “curiositie” amongst the first couple’s sins along with Doubt, Infidelity, Security, Pride, Idolatry, Unthankfulness and Murder.²⁸ Eve, however, was particularly condemned by moralists for her ill-judged curiosity. Aphra Behn (c.1640-1689) put it pithily: “too much curiosity lost paradise”.²⁹ In his 1694 *Ladies’ Dictionary; being a General Entertainment for the Fair Sex: a Work never attempted before in English*, the pseudonymous author N.H. shares this opinion of Eve, presenting curiosity as a general female characteristic:

...for if it was in her nature then, as it certainly is in the nature of many of her Daughters... This Fair Creature, we may suppose, transported with the prohibition, grew more curious and inquisitive...³⁰

Possibly mindful of his readership, he also defends Eve who ‘resisted the Temptation for a time, and urged Reasons against complying with it...’.³¹ Other Biblical and mythical stories, such as that of Lot’s Wife and Psyche, were used to present transgressive curiosity as a particularly female trait leading to disaster.³² In the 1611 edition of his *Iconologia*, Cesare Ripa depicted “*Curiosità*” as a female figure, noting “*La curiosità è desiderio sfrenato di coloro che cercano sapere più di quello che devono*” (“Curiosity is the unbridled desire of those who seek to know more than they need to know”).³³ The 1709 English edition describes “Curiosity” as having “an abundance of Ears and Frogs on her Robe; her Hair stands up on end; Wings on her Shoulders; her Arms lifted up; she thrusts out her Head in a prying Posture. The other things denote her running up and down, to hear, and to see, as some do after News”³⁴ (Figure 3).

[Figure 3 here]

This is a woman out of control, lacking decorum and threatening to the social order – the complete opposite of a virtuous woman quietly doing her “work”, that is her needlework, while listening to a reading from an improving book with friends or servants. Glimpses of such disciplined lives are given in the diaries of two elite women. Lady Margaret Hoby (1599-1605), living in isolation in Holderness, North Yorkshire, recorded in her diary for 12 August 1601: “After prairs [prayers], I wrought, as I was accustomed, with my maides, and hard [heard] Mr Ardington read: and, after I dined and had slept a Little, I went to my worke againe, and hard Mr Ardington again...”.³⁵ She often listened to her chaplains Rhodes and Ardington read sermons or Protestant works such as Foxe’s so-called *Book of Martyrs*.³⁶ In contrast, Lady Anne Clifford (1590-1676) at Knole, Kent, was more likely to be listening to a secular work such as Spenser’s *Fairy Queen* while she sewed.³⁷ On 9 November 1616, she recorded: “...I sat at my Work & heard Rivers and Marsh read Montaigne’s Essays”.³⁸ Whatever the other tensions in their lives, this communal needlework indicates unthreatening, almost comforting, domestic order and routine. For Lady Anne, her embroidery was a consolation: “...I made an end of my cushion of Irish Stitch...it being my chief help to pass away the time to work”.³⁹ The curiosity evident here is directed and managed.

Despite the demonization of uncontrolled curiosity by moralists and theologians, a certain type of curiosity did come to be seen as an admirable quality, later to evolve and diverge into connoisseurship and scientific investigation as a marker of elite, usually male, culture.⁴⁰ Such socially acceptable curiosity contrasts strongly with the transgressive female curiosity represented by Eve and her inquisitive sisters. As Neil Kenny observes, in early modern Europe “much male curiosity had become good” while “a much larger proportion of bad curiosity was now female”.⁴¹ Curiosity thus operated as a gendered framework as it progressed from being modelled as the vice of inquisitiveness into a virtue, legitimising

scientific investigation. Such curiosity was often focused – quite literally – on issues of scale and on looking; there was great interest in ways of seeing differently, including perspective boxes, camera obscura and magnifying or distorting glasses to look at the distant moon or examine otherwise invisible things.⁴² Samuel Pepys purchased his microscope on 13 August 1664 and reflected on what “a curious curiosity it is to [see] objects in a dark room”.⁴³ Marr noted that such curiosity had many, sometimes contradictory, meanings embracing “human enquiry, sustained scrutiny of specific objects, revelation of the hidden, admiration of the handiwork of God, emotional and cognitive response at experiencing the new and unfamiliar” through “travelling, collecting, natural philosophy”.⁴⁴

These are just the areas of intellectual enquiry to which Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (c.1624-1674) was angrily and desperately laying claim (despite being the first woman to attend a meeting of the Royal Society in 1667⁴⁵), asserting to the “Morall Philosophers” that “curiosity make[s] a Man to be above other creatures”.⁴⁶ Such “curiosity” was not accessible to the majority of well-off girls with their genteel education or to affluent women with time on their hands – time which they devoted (or were made to devote) to “curious works” or as Cavendish describes them “wrought workes”:

Besides, Poetry, which is built upon Fancy, Women may claime, as a worke belonging most properly to themselves: for I have observ'd, that their Braines work usually in a Fantasticall motion: in their severall, and various dresses, in their many and singular choices of Cloaths, and Ribbons, and the like; in their curious shadowing, and mixing of Colours, in their Wrought workes, and divers sorts of Stitches they employ their Needle, and many Curious things they make, as Flowers, Boxes, Baskets with Beads, Shells, Silke, Straw, or anything else ... and thus their Thoughts are employed perpetually with Fancies.⁴⁷

Despite her personal distaste for needlework, Cavendish argued that the intelligence and aesthetic sensitivity needed to master the arts of dress, embroidery and craft were analogous to those required to write a poem: the making of “curious things” was the practice of an equal, but female, curiosity.

“Natures curious Mould”

The “curious” in early modern England was remarkably protean and sometimes ambivalent, if not ambiguous, embracing the animate and the inanimate, the tangible and the intangible. A person, both in conduct and in the body, cosmetics, polyphonic music, food, architecture, intellectual inquiry or gossips’ questions – all could be “curious”.⁴⁸

What did it mean to describe someone’s conduct or person as “curious”? N.H.’s *Ladies’ Dictionary* combines a gloriously eclectic mix of stories of heroic women, instructions in “Domestick affairs, Beautifying, Preserving, Candyng, Physick, Chirurgery” and social guidance, all with a strong undercurrent of moral direction.⁴⁹ He often uses the word ‘curious’ in relation to positive and negative aspects of male and female behaviour. He compliments the unnamed woman whose “Private Memoirs” he claimed had informed his *Dictionary* by characterising her as a “Person well known to all the World, for being both Exact and Curious...”.⁵⁰ However, such curiosity had to be carefully balanced. Being “over-curiously Nice and Critical” was not attractive whereas being precise, neat and careful in deeds and thought was praiseworthy: “be curious in the neat folding up your Letter”.⁵¹ To be respected, a man needed to be guarded and measured: “as curious of his Thoughts as of his Actings in Markets and Theaters”.⁵² Equally, virgins had to be cautious for “curiosity is a dangerous temptation... the most dangerous whereof is the keeping or allowing of bad company and Idleness” which could be mitigated by “acquiring of any of those Ornamental Improvements that become their quality as Musick, Languages, Needle-Work, Writing, and

such others”.⁵³ Too much curiosity – and a consequent lack of social decorum – on the part of a married woman could lead to domestic disaster:

many a Lady out of curiosity, going to give Kitchen directions, has done no good, but a great deal of harm, by causing a good dinner to be spoiled; for the Cook-maid supposing herself too old, or too experienced to be taught, while she in a discomposed manner has been fretting like Gum'd Taffata, the Jack has stood still, the Sawces [sauces] washed to nothing, and the over-boiling Pot pist out the Fire, so that all being in disorder and confusion, the lady has suffered in her Conduct, by being over-nicely curious...⁵⁴

Thomas Blount's definitions in his 1661 *Glossographia* share this ambivalence.⁵⁵ Being “*Accurate*” was to be “curious, diligent, exact” but being “*Captious*” was to be “full of craft, curious, hurtful” while engaging in “*Mateologie*” [“idle talk”] meant timewasting in “vain enquiry, or over-curious search into high matters and mysteries”.⁵⁶ Clearly getting the right balance of appropriate curiosity was a delicate issue. Similar unease appears in N.H.'s linking of curiosity and the sense of sight. He sometimes echoes St Augustine, who framed curiosity as “the lust of the eyes” (“*concupiscentia oculorum*”⁵⁷), telling the story of a widower “casting a more curious Eye” on the “Youth and Beauty” of his dead wife's maid.⁵⁸ Elsewhere N.H. characterises “curious” sight as mode of learning through observation: “curiously to Scrutenize their Originals”; a rich young Man “curiously” views a marble statue; “a curious eye guided by understanding”.⁵⁹ Merging the physical and intellectual processes of observation and reflection, he claims the brain itself “wherein we hold the chief seat of Understanding to be placed [is] compounded of a substance subtil and curious”.⁶⁰

From this, it is an easy step to model the body as a “Curious Mansion” which, when the humours are in balance, produces “fair children” or “very curious pieces [sic]”.⁶¹ Women's bodies are particularly “curious”; being made in “Natures curious Mould”, they may have “the most curious Skin”, a “curious White Neck” and a “mouth Small and Curiously made”.⁶² However, much of N. H.'s focus is on how the body can be modified, sometimes to be made more “curious”. He even provides a method for reducing over-large breasts to “a curious Plumpness”.⁶³ Recipes for cosmetic preparations (for example, to make the hands “a curious white” and “*Powder of a curious Scent*”⁶⁴) are accompanied by an avowed preference for the morally honest unadorned face without “curious mixtures of artificial fading colours”.⁶⁵ Above all, it is the transformation of hair, “Natures Curious Ornament”, that N.H. links with the curious.⁶⁶ “Curious Flaxen” hair could be changed by applying “a curious Black” dye while straight hair could be “curiously Curled”.⁶⁷ Women are criticised for setting “forth their delicate tresses, curled and frounced in the most curious Inviting manner” while men are censured for being “over curious” of their “Head and Beard”.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the point is clear: modifying the natural is what makes it curious – and fashionable.

Defining “curious things”

What makes material things “curious” is just as complex. The simplest category is that of the exotic and the unknown, as when Blount describes “*Tampoy*” (“a curious sort of drink in the Moluccoes and Philippines made of a kind of Gilliflowers”) or simply the very expensive and luxurious, as when “*Chaplet*” is defined as a “Wreath, Garland, or attire for the head made of Gold, Pearl, or other costly or curious stuff...”.⁶⁹ It can also be a quality of a raw material. John Evelyn (1620-1706), reporting on the state of the country's forestry to the Royal Society in 1622, describes the wood of the ash tree “curiously cambleted and veined”, echoing Blount's definition of “*Nodous*” as “knotty, full of knots, knurs, joynts or difficulties; curious or scrupulous”.⁷⁰ In made things, the concept can evoke the new. For N.H., novelty is curious: Vulcan made the “first Curious Necklace that ever was seen” for Hermione, wife of

Cadmus.⁷¹ Most importantly, the “curious” evoked complexity as with an “*Arabesque*” which was a “small and curious flourishing”.⁷² Such elaboration could be found in many things, from buildings to furniture. Camden described Wollaton Hall, built by Robert Smythson between 1582 and 1588 for Sir Francis Willoughby, as “a very stately house, both for the splendid appearance and curious workmanship of it”.⁷³ Smythson’s drawings show this elaborate surface working, reflecting his eclectic sources (Figures 4a and 4b).⁷⁴ Timothy Mowl vividly evokes Wollaton’s “overbearing silhouette and fretted wall surfaces” where “detail encrusts the house with a three-dimensional depth [of] curving pie-crust strapwork”, concluding that, at Wollaton, “blank surfaces are anathema”.⁷⁵ Presumably the thirty-six “curious Pillars” which Blount mentions in his definition of *Mausoleum* shared similar intense surface decoration.⁷⁶

[Figures 4a and 4b here, side by side]

Less frenetically, some made things were considered “curious” by virtue of their categorisation as works of art. Sales catalogues routinely describe prints, drawings and paintings as “curious”. A 1691 sale at Smythers Coffee-House offered “A curious colletion of paintings and limnings” including a “curious piece of Vanity very fine”, a “curious Moon-shine by Van Diest”, a “curious Landskip” and a “curious Landskip by Van Dies”.⁷⁷ Presumably this reflects their luxurious inutility, their subject matter and also the skill of making. Such skill was key in making something “curious”, be it metal or marzipan. Harrison noted that English pewter workers had “grown unto such exquisite cunning that they can in manner imitate by infusion any form or fashion of cup, dish, salt bowl, or goblet, which is made by goldsmiths’ craft, though they be never so curious, exquisite, and artificially forged”.⁷⁸ Similarly, a skilled pastry-cook could create forms of “marchpaine wrought with no small curiositie...”.⁷⁹ The idea of transformation and imitation is central here as the raw material and skill of making intersect to create the curious. As discussed above, N.H. describes how to make “curious” hair more “curious” while Evelyn used the term to describe both ash wood and the process of working it to create a “curious lustre, so as it is hardly to be distinguished from the most curiously diapered Olive”.⁸⁰ Such “excellency of cunning” can bring about a fusion of nature and artifice as Blount shows in his definitions of “curious” marquetry and mosaic work:

Marquetry is a most curious work wrought in wood of divers colours, and divers sorts, into the shape of knots, flowers and other devices, with that excellency of cunning, as they seem all to be one piece, and rather the work of Nature then Art...

Mosaique or Musaical work (Mosaicum, musaeacum vel Musivum opus) is a most curious work wrought with stones of divers colours, and divers mettles, into the shape of knots, flowers, and other devices, with that excellency of cunning, that they seem all to be one stone, and rather the work of Nature then Art.⁸¹

This creative interaction of art and nature is a familiar trope from gardening literature and practice:

How art also helpeth nature in the daily colouring, doubling, and enlarging the proportion of our flowers, it is incredible to report: for so curious and cunning are our gardeners now in these days that they presume to do in manner what they list with nature...⁸²

Nature when manipulated as “Gardens, Orchards, Rivers, Flowry Meads” could form “curious prospects”⁸³ which were as much part of the thriving seventeenth-century consumer

culture for luxurious things and imported goods. Understanding and creating the curious from natural materials had a social value too. N.H. admonished cook-maids to “be curious in Garnishing your Dishes” in order to demonstrate their ability to transform the natural into the fashionable through artifice while “the Brides handywork appeared in the more curious part of the Pastery, in various Images, Figures, Similitudes of Fruit and Flowers, which her Industry and Ingenuity had framed a Graceful Garniture to accomodate the worthy Guests”.⁸⁴

Whether natural or made, curious things share a range of qualities: they may be rich, sometimes exotic, materials which may be highly manipulated with elaborate surface textures, restless, convoluted and interlaced, but achieving an integrity of their own through the cunning hand and mind of the maker. It is time now to explore how these qualities play out when applied to female “curious works” worked with the needle.

“Singular dexterity in curious Works”

N.H.’s *Ladies’ Dictionary* overtly engages with contemporaneous concerns as to how women should comport themselves in a rapidly changing society:

Wives here may read how to demean themselves toward their Husbands in all Conjugal Affection. Daughters may here be taught Examples of Obedience and Chastity, from the Vestal Votaresses. Matrons may find here that decent Deportment which becomes their Gravity, and Widows, that Constancy which befits their Solitude.⁸⁵

To achieve this, N.H. provides thumbnail biographies of a variety of female role models. The moral worth of two such heroic women, one from the classical world and one from the New Testament, is both exemplified by their skill in making “curious work” and created by it:

Tanaquil who was sometimes Wife to the Elder Tarquain; she was a very prudent Woman and an Excellent Inventress of curious work, especially in Embroideries of Purple and Gold...

Tabitha, otherwise called Dorcas, whom our blessed Saviour raised from the Dead, was no doubt a Woman of singular dexterity in curious Works with the Needle, for there we find those who lament her death, seem as much to grieve for the loss of her Art, which must probably have dyed with her. As for the Artist, as appears by shewing curious Works, and no doubt, commending them very highly as things rare, and not to be parallel’d by any of her Sex of that Country or in those times.⁸⁶

Clearly, the ability to create “curious work” was a praiseworthy feminine skill which conferred moral worth as well as desirable social standing. In this context, “work” is both a noun and a verb, the made artefact and the practice of making, which absorbed much of the time of girls and women in sufficiently affluent, aspirational households. This is evidently not “plain work” which was for those who had to earn a living by their needle. Dr William Denton was explicit about these distinctions when he outlined his plans to send his seven-year old daughter to France so she could learn professional sewing skills:

As for her needle, my highest ambition was never above a plain stitch, but to learn to cut out ...that she may be either seamstress or taylor, anything to get a living by...⁸⁷

Making “curious work” demonstrated a certain level of social rank and aspiration as well as the ability of a father, brother or husband to pay for appropriate schooling and the expensive materials as well as supporting the conspicuous consumption of “leisure time” required to produce it. This is an almost text book examples of Bourdieu’s model of consumption and taste to differentiate social status with the addition of making as a further distinction.⁸⁸

Although pattern books were clearly available and influential, few technical instructions were provided; John Taylor merely lists the names of stitches in his poem *The Praise of the Needle*.⁸⁹ *The Accomplish’d Ladies Delight* gives instructions for embroidering “belts, bodices or Petticoats”:

Get your Pattern drawn, and then form it about with what you like best, black Gimp or other, and fill up the under parts and leaves with saxon-stitch, some light and some darker, and let the upper parts and Seeds of Flowers be done with high work, as Purple stich or others, and let the stalks be all alike with a great Gimp twisted, you may make your Flowers of what fancy you please in shadows, and being well shadowed they will appear very Natural.⁹⁰

This reinforces the link between the natural and made while highlighting the freedom the embroiderer had to interpret designs using raised stitches (“high work”) but clearly intended for embroidered clothing and accessories rather than curious work. Learning embroidery was evidently more usually achieved by mothers and teachers passing on their knowledge and skills of making rather than through written texts. Peter Erondell depicts English’s French language teaching dialogues depict Fleurimond’s and Charlotte’s mother checking on their needlework.⁹¹ The author of *A Supplement-like to the Queen-like Closet*, purportedly the well-known cookery and domestic skills specialist Hannah Wolley, offered to teach “ingenious persons” embroidery in their own homes for four shillings a day.⁹² Embroidery in the form of “curious works” was a major component of curriculum at genteel girls boarding schools.⁹³ The note associated with an embroidered box in the Ashmolean Museum records: “The cabinet was made by my Mother’s Grandmother who was educated at Hackney School...”.⁹⁴ This female transmission extended to the works themselves. Just as the Ashmolean box passed down the female line, Mrs Maitland describes how a “curious cabinet” now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, became hers “at the death of my mother, and was the work of her grandmother, Martha Edlin”.⁹⁵ Somewhat surprisingly, N.H. echoes Cavendish’s plea for the recognition of the value of intellectual female curiosity in areas other than embroidery. Arguing that “the Fair Sex” are not just “the glorious Subjects of Poetry” but “themselves have been very commendably the Authoresses of many curious Pieces, wherein their Ingenuity has been livelily displayed” and if they would “bend their Talents this way, they might be capable of equaling, if not exceeding the men”.⁹⁶ Listing Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1651/3), Ann Askew (1521-1546), Lady Elizabeth Carew (c. 1500-1546), “Astera Behen” [Aphra Behn] and Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, amongst others as authors of “very curious” plays and poems, he evidently considered such writing as a suitable activity for women when restricted to appropriate subjects: “a very curious Recreation, if it be on worthy Subjects, nay, it Elevates and Illuminates the Mind to an high degree of Refining it”.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, he maintained that embroidery had a central role in defining female character and moral reputation: the ideal woman should “not be Ignorant of needdle work, and other curious matters, that at Leisure times will give her a double advantage, viz. Gain her a repute of being Industrious and Ingenious, and prove a pleasing recreation to her”.⁹⁸

“Curious work” in the home

Despite their expensive materials and the social importance in “making” the goodly and godly woman, the material result of all this time and expense does not seem to have been considered worth recording. Little is known about where these embroideries were made or kept in the home. They are generally absent from contemporaneous inventories and no examples have yet been found in the rare contemporaneous representations of English domestic interiors, and few are linked to houses in which they might have been made.⁹⁹ It is necessary to employ the historical archaeology model and use tangential textual evidence to gain some indication where these embroideries might have been worked.

The diaries of elite women such as Lady Margaret Hoby and Lady Anne Clifford make it clear that they had a private closet or chamber where they could pray, read and do their “work”, sometimes with members of their households.¹⁰⁰ Lord Shrewsbury reported that

Mary, Queen of Scots, did her embroidery in Lady Shrewsbury's chamber "where, with Lady Leviston and M^{rs} Seton, she sits working with the needle, wherein she much delights, and devising works".¹⁰¹ Such private spaces seem to have been female preserves. When Lord Russell and Sir Edward George came to visit her at Knole, she reports that: "My Lord made very much of them and shewed them the House and the Chambers and my Closet, but I did not stir forth from my Chamber".¹⁰² In other words, she kept away from this male visitation. In Paris, the Duc de Liancourt respected such boundaries; he asked his wife to leave her closet so Evelyn and Van der Borcht could view the paintings there.¹⁰³ Evelyn later created such a room for his own wife, Mary Evelyn, at Sayes Court who was praised for 'perform[ing] in that in a silent closset which whole courts & Theatres would unanimously applaud', a comment which reinforces the essentially enclosed and private nature of the space.¹⁰⁴ Needlework was evidently also undertaken in larger and communal spaces, presumably partly influenced by the nature of the project as large "tents" (frames) could be required and the need for light. In her romance, Wroth described the ladies attending Princess Dalinae sewing in "a faire compasse [bay] Window".¹⁰⁵ "Work" could be combined with other activities. Hutchinson describes working simultaneously on her embroidery and her Lucretius translation while her children studied with their tutors in the same room.¹⁰⁶

The "embroidered cabinet" listed in Lady Katherine's room in the 1681 inventory of Hamilton Palace, Lanarkshire, is exceptional evidence of the physical location of an embroidery, whether or not it was "curious work".¹⁰⁷ Marmion's print (c.1640) shows a fashionable lady's bedroom but the box on her dressing table appears to be wood rather than embroidered.¹⁰⁸ Embroideries were probably not presented as pictures hanging on walls until much later in their social lives. Unless embroideries had a clear function as a mirror surround or box covering, it seems more likely they kept in a more private female space or stored and only taken out for occasional viewing. This would also mean that those embroideries which do appear to have an overt political or religious significance would not place a family at risk. Tara Hamling has argued that the plasterwork depictions of Biblical narratives, often featuring Abraham, in early modern Protestant domestic interiors provided protective surveillance.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, the female figures in these embroideries are often explicitly exposed to the male gaze – and placed at risk in consequence. Eve is made newly visible to Adam (and to God), David gazes at Bathsheba from his raised tower, the Wicked Elders feast voyeuristically on Susanna's nakedness, Actaeon glimpses Dinah bathing while Arethusa runs from Alpheus and Daphne flees Apollo. Made and used by women, "curious works" depict the male gaze but may rarely have been subjected to it.

Re-viewing "curious work"

Viewing these embroideries as "curious works" provides a new perspective for interpreting their materials and construction. They share the same characteristics of the rich, exotic and luxurious, elaborated surfaces and, above all, skill in working and transforming the natural identified above as key in defining the "curious".

An early seventeenth-century panel associated with Wollaton Hall has the same "encrusted detail" noted by Mowl in the surface decoration of the Hall.¹¹⁰ This highly dimensional embroidery has a central "star" worked in pearls surrounded by scrollwork forming compartments containing two types of grotesque sea-creatures, serpents passing through barrels or baskets and tree-like motifs. The silk and metal threads are complex structures in themselves and form such a densely worked, complex surface that hardly any of the underlying cream satin fabric is visible.¹¹¹ This interest in texture, density and

dimensionality is also evident in a raised work embroidery depicting *Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac*, dated 1673 and initialled I and E or Y using small pearls (Figure 5a). An elaborate cartouche frames the dramatic scene showing the angel staying Abraham's hand just as he is about to kill his son. Time is frozen but invisible winds flutter Abraham's free-standing needlepoint cloak. Isaac's head is a three-dimensional sculptural form in padded silk satin. The many-turreted house, bulging rocks ornamented with pearls and spiky coral, rippling pool and three-dimensional lion and leopard are standard "curious" motifs. It is the sculptural needlepoint birds with wired wings which demonstrate the transformative fusion of artifice and nature underlying much "curious work". Radiography revealed the three birds' skulls, one possibly a finch or linnet (Figure 5b).¹¹² The made – *artificialia* – and the once-living birds – *naturalia* – are literally stitched together in a creative "curious" ambiguity.

[Figure 5a and 5b here; side by side]

Seen in this light, the presence of other natural materials such as hair and feathers are significant not just for their aesthetic qualities but for connecting the embroideries to the practice of curiosity. The making and transforming of hair was clearly of as much interest to the embroiderers as it was to N.H. In *The Proclamation of Solomon*, each figure has hair worked in different materials and techniques (Figure 6a). Solomon's hair is slightly raised long and short stitch in silk. Nathan's is fine wire wrapped with silk thread while Bathsheba's maid is the most elaborate, formed of coils of wrapped wire which once had bundles of hair couched over them (Figure 6b).

[Figure 6a and Figure 6b here; side by side]

This piece also has many of the other characteristics of "curious work": a compressed narrative, a clear ordering of the pictorial space but a lack of concern about scale (a butterfly as big as a carnation, a mermaid dwarfing a lion) and, above all, the interest in complex textured surfaces achieved through luxurious metal threads and exotica such as coral and pearls combined with natural materials such as feathers and hair. The insects filling the interstices may echo contemporary male curiosity applied to exploring the natural world with magnifying lenses.¹¹³ The variety of stitches and techniques is particularly evident in the lavish raised work rocks, ornamented with pearls and coral or cornelian beads, surrounding the rippling pool. This has a miniature water spout worked in wired needlepoint complete with a gushing stream of "water" of metal threads. Such rocks may be referencing the fashionable grottos which featured fountains and collections of geological specimens and minerals and which themselves, as Arthur MacGregor points out, had strong links with cabinets of curiosity.¹¹⁴

Curious works and cabinets of curiosity

In 1652, Evelyn received a gift from his wife Mary – an elaborate cabinet opening up to reveal compartments ornamented with fruitwood and ivory marquetry highlighted by reflecting mirror-glass.¹¹⁵ Deeply interested in collecting and curiosities, he used it to store prints and artefacts. Such cabinets were a visible outcome of respectable, intellectual curiosity, literally being *multum in parvo* ("much in little"), bringing together the natural and

artificial, the rare and the exotic so important in the practice of curiosity.

The 1656 *Catalogue of those Rarities and Curiosities* of the Tradescants much larger and publicly accessible cabinet of curiosities, known as “The Ark”, and the accompanying plant list of the *Hortus Tradescantianus* show intriguing commonalities with embroidered “curious works”. The collection even included an embroidery of “Jupiter, Jo. and Mercury wrought in Tent-stitch”.¹¹⁶ The preface reveals the categorising principles of *naturalia* and *artificialia*:

one Naturall ... as divers sorts of Birds, foure-footed Beasts and Fishes... Others are lesse familiar... as the shell-Creatures, Insects, Mineralls, Outlandish-Fruits... The other sort is Artificialls ... rare curiosities of Art, &c.¹¹⁷

Here are the flora and fauna as well as the precious stones and corals seen so often on embroidered “curious works”. For example, the materials used in an embroidery of *Two Ladies Personifying Taste and Touch* include seed pearls, agate, carnelians, coral, rock crystal, glass beads and mica.¹¹⁸ The significance of such exotica can be revaluated when they are compared with materials included in cabinets of curiosity. For example, “The Ark” contained both worked and unworked coral while a sprig appears amongst the shells in John Tradescant’s double portrait.¹¹⁹ An example of highly worked coral formed into a representation of the crucifixion survives in Archduke Ferdinand’s Kunst- und Wunderkammer at Schloss Ambras.¹²⁰ The plant catalogue lists “a great variety of Tulips” which also feature in many of the “curious” embroideries such as *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. These tulips reflect the interest in transforming nature particularly evident in the development of selective breeding by “curious florists”.¹²¹ Intriguingly, the herbalist Parkinson makes a direct comparison between these “wrought” flowers and their representation in embroidery:

[A]bove and beyond all others, the Tulipas may be so matched, one colour answering and setting of another, that the place where they stand may resemble a peece of curious needle-worke.¹²²

Exotica such as unicorns and mermaids were physically collected in the cabinets of curiosity and visually represented on the embroideries. Viewing these mermaids and sirens as part of the project of curiosity makes sense of their otherwise apparently incongruous presence in embroideries depicting Biblical stories.

Some elite English women were beginning to be recognised as collectors in the second half of the seventeenth century, just when “curious work” was particularly popular. Porcelain, itself seen as a “curious work” since it was a “wrought” natural material, was particularly associated with female collecting. It is also depicted on some of the embroideries, another way of “collecting” curiosities.¹²³ However, it is a Dutch woman, Joanna Van Breda, who is known for being actively involved in displaying the curiosities in her husband Levinus Vincent’s cabinet of curiosities known as the *Wondertooneel der Nature* (“Wonder Theatre of Nature”). Significantly, the careful harmony of their displays was repeatedly compared to embroidery, possibly reflecting not only a feminine engagement with needlework but also Vincent’s professional expertise as a high-end textile designer and merchant. One visitor saw Van Breda as demonstrating virtuous curiosity, a recovery of prelapsarian harmony before it was lost through Eve’s curiosity: “Where once in paradise was Adam with his Eva, thou are there with your spouse to arrange God’s wonders”.¹²⁴

Other Flemish collectors housed their curiosities, like Evelyn, in elegant cabinets, some of which were decorated with raised-work embroidered panels which may have been commissioned from professional needlewomen.¹²⁵ The importance here is the idea and practice of enclosing “curiosities” within a miniature world.¹²⁶ Some of the embroidered “cabinets” made by English embroiderers are clearly achieving this. In contrast to the complex, multi-door and drawered ornamented standing cabinets, boxes are often separated into a larger lower compartment accessed by doors concealing inner drawers and, beneath the

hinged lid, a shallow upper compartment. This may have a print pasted to the base as does the box in the Feller's Ashmolean donation which has a coloured engraving showing a rural scene which repeatedly reflects in mirrors lining the sides of the well.¹²⁷ A similar effect of an endlessly reflecting world is created by the landscape print in a box which has the mirrors angled across the corners of the upper compartment.¹²⁸ These reflecting worlds link "curious works" with experiments into light and mirrors undertaken by curious male investigators into optics and distorting reflections.¹²⁹

Commodifying curiosity

In *Vermeer's Hat*, Tim Brook brilliantly demonstrated how the representations of the material world depicted in Vermeer's paintings linked with the world of commerce.¹³⁰ He showed how the fashionable beaver hat in the *Officer and Laughing Girl* (c. 1658) was connected with the devastation of the European beaver population and with European trade.¹³¹ The same web of trading connections is demonstrated by the miniature representation of the beaver hats which appear frequently in these embroideries, sometimes worked in three dimensions, and often ornamented with an elaborately worked feather.¹³² Not only do the embroideries represent fashionable textiles and dress and occasionally, as discussed above, imported porcelain, they themselves embody commodified curiosity in the world of goods. Their silks, metal threads, corals, semi-precious stones, pearls and glass beads were imported luxuries, presumably supplied through specialist traders. The beads, for example, seem to have been imported from Amsterdam while the metal threads, even if made in Europe and customised in the home, carried a memory of earlier import routes in their common names of "Venice" and "Cyprus" gold.¹³³ The embroideries and the cabinets have a commonality here. Although cabinets and *Kunstkammer* are, as their names reveal, rooted and contained in specific, custom-designed spaces and places, they reflect travel and trade. Collectors, or their agents, scoured the globe for rarities and wondrous things. Tradescant the elder travelled widely in Europe, Russia and visited Virginia and Algeria, searching "for all manner of rare beasts, fowls and birds, shells, stones, etc."¹³⁴ The global reach of trade and the burgeoning impulse towards empire is condensed in the cabinet of curiosity and in the "curious work". Travel is also represented in the records of international visitors to cabinets of curiosity; Peter the Great signed Vincent's visiting book. As well as visiting Tradescant's "Ark" and Sloane's collection, Evelyn took every opportunity to see other cabinets during his European travels.¹³⁵ In marked contrast, the embroideries seem to have led a very different social life. As discussed above, the display mode of these "curious works" is unclear and it seems likely, although this remains unproven, that they were mainly kept and viewed in a restricted, predominately female space. The embroidery *The Four Continents* exemplifies this interplay between the local and the global and the domestic and the world of trade and travel (Figure 7).¹³⁶ The rustic central scene, showing farming and fishing, is surrounded by figures embodying the world's four corners: an elaborately dressed lady holding a censer represents Asia, a semi-naked man with a bow and arrow stands for America and a black figure with a globe evokes Africa while Europe is shown as a Queen, possibly holding a Bible.¹³⁷ Like the cabinet of curiosity, such an embroidery is a microcosm of the old and new worlds created by an embroiderer practising curiosity while "working" in her home.

[Figure 7 here]

Conclusion: performing curiosity

A performance of the practice of curiosity through making is described in a 1685 novel telling the story of the doomed romance of Ortelia and Amasius. Ortelia gives her would-be suitor a message through her embroidery:

...alone in her Chamber, employ'd upon a piece of curious Needlework, wherein she had drawn the little God smiling at a disconsolate Lady whose Heart he had, newly struck with one of his Feather'd Weapons, prostrate at his Feet...¹³⁸

Cavendish argued that the process of making demonstrated that women were “employed perpetually with Fancies”, that is, with the practice of curiosity.¹³⁹ Batchelor makes the same point in his eulogy for Susan Perwich:

.... She
In needles Art attain'd to be
Perfectly curious;¹⁴⁰

Performing such “curious work” may thus be read as having an intellectual agency as significant as the moral agency of the act of embroidery in creating the goodly and godly woman or the social agency of the resulting artefact.¹⁴¹ These embroideries share a materiality with cabinets of curiosity and represent elements contained within them. This is not to suggest that any contemporary would have thought of “curious works” in this way and they certainly lack the same systematic or encyclopaedic approach, but viewing them as the outcome of the practice of female curiosity removes them from inevitably disparaging comparisons with pictorial traditions and sets them within a framework of legitimate curiosity expressed in a technique traditionally associated with the feminine. It also restores full meaning to the term “curious works”. Making this connection using the “lens of curiosity” broadens and deepens understanding of the significance of these artefacts and “thickens” their position as part of the more general project of curiosity, usually modelled as masculine entitlement and engagement. The performance of the making of “curious work” can be “re-viewed” as a female mode of enquiry and a means for the making of knowledge which, as Cavendish asserted, women “may claime” as “belonging most properly to themselves”.¹⁴²

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IMAGE CAPTIONS

Fig. No	Caption
Figure 1	1 <i>Lot's Wife</i> , early to mid-seventeenth, 317mm x 428mm, Feller Donation. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 2	Figure 2 Lot and his family escaping from Sodom and Gomorra, 1585, 207mm x 254mm, <i>Thesaurus sacrarum historiarum veteris testamenti, elegantissimis imaginibus expressum excellentissimorum in hac arte virorum opera: nunc primum in lucem editus</i> , published by Gerard de Jode after Frans Menton, British Museum, 1968, 1018.1.30 © Trustees of the British Museum. [Creative Commons]
Figure 3	"Curiosity"; probably by Isaac Fuller the Younger, Cesare Ripa <i>Iconologia</i> , London: Pierces Tempest, 1709, Fig 80.
Figure 4a [quarter page]	Robert Smythson, Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire: half elevation design for the entrance © RIBA Collections
Figure 4b	Robert Smythson, Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire: design for a panel for the hall screen © RIBA Collections
Figure 5a	<i>The Sacrifice of Isaac</i> , 1673, 445mm x 555mm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 5b	Radiograph, detail, showing bird skull in <i>The Sacrifice of Isaac</i> . © Sonia O'Connor, University of Bradford
Figure 6a	<i>The Proclamation of Solomon</i> , mid- to late 17 th century, 354mm x 475mm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 6b.	Detail showing construction of maid's hair, <i>The Proclamation of Solomon</i> . © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.
Figure 7	<i>The Four Continents</i> Feller Donation Ashmolean Museum, mid- to late 17 th century, 410mm x 510mm. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Miller, *Cultural Histories* and Riello, “Things that shape history”.
2. Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church, University of Oxford, commenting on Hutton, *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts*; see: <http://www.easons.com/p-3930965-physical-evidence-for-ritual-acts-sorcery-and-witchcraft-in-christian-britain.aspx>. I am indebted to Dr Dinah Eastop for drawing this comment to my attention.
3. Some work by female professional needleworkers could also be considered ‘curious’ but may have had specific functions and was possibly more closely related to techniques used by professional male embroiders. For example, milliners from London’s Royal Exchange, referred to their ‘rare and curious covers of imbrothery and needleworke... wherein Bibles, Testaments and Psalm Books... have been richly bound up ...’; see Barber, *Textile and Embroidered Bindings*, 7.
- ⁴ Brathwait, *The English Gentlewoman*, 139; for further discussion of the moral role of embroidery, see Brooks, Feller and Holdsworth, *Feller: Needlework Collection*, 66-67.
- ⁵ Significant holdings are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool Museums; Burrell Collection, Glasgow; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum, Colonial Williamsburg.
- ⁶ For methods of transferring designs and the role of pattern drawers, see Brooks, *English Embroideries*, 13-14.
- ⁷ For changing attitudes to these embroideries, see Brooks, “‘Another freak of fashion’,” 12-17.
- ⁸ Morris, *Of Church Embroidery*, 675. I am indebted to Dr Lynn Hulse for drawing this article to my attention.
- ⁹ The origins of the term are unclear. It may relate to the padding technique, draw on the idea that “stamps” (printing blocks) were used and thus be a corruption of “stamp” or be an English corruption of the French “estompe” used as an alternative to the English term “embossed”. It seems to have emerged in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries; see Brooks, “‘Another freak of fashion’,” 17, note 1.
- ¹⁰ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*.
- ¹¹ Mitchison, “Sewing furiously,” 18.
- ¹² Yvonne Hackenbroch, who catalogued Irwin Untermyer’s donation of embroideries to the Metropolitan Museum, routinely refers to seventeenth-century embroideries as “needlework pictures” or “pictures”; see Hackenbroch, *English and Other Needlework*, xxii-xxxvi and Brooks, “Landscape of language,” 51-58.
- ¹³ See, for example, Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 82-109; Frye, *Pens and Needles*, especially Chapter 3; Morrall and Watt, *Twixt Art and Nature*.
- ¹⁴ Beaudry, *Findings*, 2.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9; Marr, “Introduction,” 4.
- ¹⁷ Bogan, *Threats and Punishments*, 92.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ¹⁹ Hutchinson (née Apsley) wrote poetry, theology and a biography of her husband, Colonel John Hutchinson, a signatory to Charles I’s death warrant. She was the first English translator of the challenging philosophical work by Lucretius *De rerum natura*; see the Lucy Hutchinson Project <http://www.cems-oxford.org/projects/lucy-hutchinson/the-works-of-lucy-hutchinson>.
- ²⁰ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, XIII, 174. For a further discussion of this theme, see Anderson, “Lucy Hutchinson’s Sodom” in the 2015 special issue of *The Seventeenth Century* dedicated to Lucy Hutchinson.
- ²¹ Hutchinson, *Order and Disorder*, XIII, 174.
- ²² See Brooks, Feller and Holdsworth, *Feller: Needlework Collection*, 20-21.
- ²³ The engraver, mapmaker and publisher Gerard de Jode (1509-1591) first published his compilation of engravings depicting Old Testament stories in 1579, with an expanded edition in 1585. These were widely used in England as a source in a variety of decorative arts; see Wells-Cole, *Art and Decoration*, 103-106.
- ²⁴ See, for example, Benedict, *Curiosity* and Harrison, “Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge and the Reformation.”
- ²⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Vol. VI, 495. Elizabeth used Erasmus’s Latin version; for her translation, see Pemberton, *Queen Elizabeth’s Englishings*, 121-141. For a discussion of this text, see Cottagnies and Parageau, *Women and Curiosity*, 10-11.
- ²⁶ Erasmus, *Ratio verae Theologiae*.
- ²⁷ Holland, *The Historie of Adam*, 10.
- ²⁸ Parr, *The Grounds of Diuinitie*, 252.
- ²⁹ Behn, “The Lucky Chance”, 205.

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- ³⁰ N.H., *Ladies Dictionary*, 410. Considine and Brown argue the *Dictionary*'s author was the publisher John Dunton who had reversed the initials "H.N." based on an anagram of his name ("Hid unto None"); see Considine and Brown, *The Ladies Dictionary*, xiv-xv.
- ³¹ N.H., *Ladies Dictionary*, 411.
- ³² For example, Shackerley Marmion (1603-1639) wrote an epic poem *The Legend of Cupid and Psyche* (1637) based on Apuleius's story in *The Golden Ass* in which he ascribes Psyche's perjury to her "foolish curiosity"; Marmion, *Cupid and Psyche*, 98.
- ³³ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 113-114. Translation from Benedict, *Curiosity*, 25 and 259, note 1.
- ³⁴ Ripa, *Iconologia: or, Moral Emblems*, 20 and Fig. 80. Ripa believed that frogs represented curiosity for the Egyptians; see Benedict, *Curiosity*, 259, note 1.
- ³⁵ Lady Hoby (née Dakins) and her third husband, Sir Thomas Posthumous Hoby (1566-1640), a noted Puritan, lived at Hackness Hall, Yorkshire. She mentions three chaplains in her diary, primarily Master Rhodes but also Master Ardington and Master Maude; Moody *Diary of Lady Hoby*, xxxvi-xxxvii and 159.
- ³⁶ On Friday 28 September 1599, Hoby records 'I hard one of the men read of the book of Marters', that is John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments of these latter and perilous Dayes* (1563); *Ibid.*, 22.
- ³⁷ Lady Anne Clifford, Countess Dowager of Dorset, Pembroke and Montgomery, lived at Knole during her first marriage to Richard Sackville, 3rd Earl of Dorset (d.1624). Moll Neville (possibly Anne's cousin Mary Neville) read *The Fairy Queen* to Lady Anne on 28 January 1617; Clifford, *Diaries of Lady Clifford*, 49.
- ³⁸ This was probably Edward Marsh, Lady Anne's secretary; Clifford, *Diaries of Lady Clifford*, 43 and 51. Sir George Rivers was one of her husband's friends; Hamlin, *Montaigne's English Journey*, 35.
- ³⁹ Clifford, *Diaries of Lady Clifford*, 43. Irish stitch, also called Florentine, Flame or Bargello stitch, is a counted thread stitch so suitable for working the open-weave fabric likely to be used for cushions.
- ⁴⁰ See Benedict, *Curiosity*, 17-18 and Marr, "Introduction," 10.
- ⁴¹ Kenny, *Uses of Curiosity*, 365.
- ⁴² See Gilman, *The Curious Perspective*.
- ⁴³ The microscope cost £5-10 shillings – 'a great price'; *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 5, 240.
- ⁴⁴ Marr, "Introduction," 6 and 9.
- ⁴⁵ Mintz, "Duchess of Newcastle's visit" and Wilkins, "Cavendish and the Royal Society."
- ⁴⁶ Cavendish, *Poems, and fancies*, 52.
- ⁴⁷ This section is addressed "To all noble, and worthy ladies"; Cavendish, "*Poems, and fancies*," unpaginated. Cavendish acknowledged her own lack of embroidery skills, recalling "my Mother did not Force me to Learn to Work with a Needle, though she found me always Unapt thereto..."; Cavendish, *CCXI Sociable Letters*, 312.
- ⁴⁸ The lexicographer Thomas Blount (1618–1679) included *Enharmoniack* in his dictionary of 'hard words', defining it as 'song of of [sic] many parts, or a curious concent of sundry Tunes'; Blount, *Glossographia*, unpaginated. Such 'curious' music could be theologically and politically suspect. In his collection of metrical psalms, Thomas Wode (d. 1592) recorded that, following the Reformation, James Stewart (later Earl of Murray and Regent of Scotland) commanded David Peebles 'to leave the curiosity of the musike; and sa to make plaine and dulce'; MacMeeken, *Scottish Metrical Psalms*, 108. Krzysztof Pomian noted how profoundly early modern architects were influenced by the culture of curiosity; Pomian, *Collectionneurs, Amateurs et Curieux*, 61-80.
- ⁴⁹ N.H., *Ladies Dictionary*, unpaginated (The Dedication).
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 235 and 261.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 408.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 443.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 420.
- ⁵⁵ Blount, *Glossographia*, unpaginated
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10, 160-161.
- ⁵⁸ N.H., *Ladies Dictionary*, 85.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 26, 47 and 288.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 328.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 316 and 324.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 191, 114, 232 and 53.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 63.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 399.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 363.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 212, 65 and 211.

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- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 315 and 374.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 108 and Blount, *Glossographia*, unpaginated. N.H. either used Blount as a source or the two shared a common source as their definitions of ‘Chaplet’ are identical.
- ⁷⁰ Evelyn, *Silva*, 149; Blount, *Glossographia*, unpaginated.
- ⁷¹ N.H., *Ladies Dictionary*, 278.
- ⁷² Blount, *Glossographia*, unpaginated.
- ⁷³ *Camden's Britannia*, 482.
- ⁷⁴ These included Jan Vredeman de Vries, Du Cerceau, Hieronymus Cock and Martin de Vos; see Friedman, *House and Household*, 108-118.
- ⁷⁵ Mowl, *Elizabethan and Jacobean Style*, 99-103.
- ⁷⁶ Blount, *Glossographia*, unpaginated.
- ⁷⁷ British Library; ESTC R214426; Wing C7668.
- ⁷⁸ Harrison, *Description of England*, 367.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 129.
- ⁸⁰ Evelyn, *Silva*, 149.
- ⁸¹ Blount, *Glossographia*, unpaginated
- ⁸² Harrison, *Description of England*, 265.
- ⁸³ N.H., *Ladies Dictionary*, 336.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., 90 and 506.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., unpaginated (The Dedication).
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., 401.
- ⁸⁷ Slater, *Verneys of Claydon House*, 134.
- ⁸⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 281-283.
- ⁸⁹ Exceptionally, Shorleyker’s 1624 pattern book *A Schoole-house for the Needle* includes a grid for scaling patterns. John Taylor’s poem *The Praise of the Needle* is included in *The Needles Excellency. A new book wherein are divers Admirable Works wrought with the Needle for the Pleasure and Profit of the Industrious* published by James Boler.
- ⁹⁰ *The Accomplish'd Lady's Delight*, 236. This was published under Hannah Wolley’s name but was not written by her; for the appropriation of Wolley’s name, see Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity*, 166-175.
- ⁹¹ Erondelle, *The French Garden*, unpaginated (Third Dialogue).
- ⁹² Wolley, *Supplement*, 82-83.
- ⁹³ See Brooks, Feller and Holdsworth, *Feller: Needlework Collection*, 14-15 and Gardiner, *English Girlhood*, 214.
- ⁹⁴ Brooks, *English Embroideries*, 40.
- ⁹⁵ V&A T41-1954; Edlin (1660-1725) was around eleven years old when she created the embroidery for this box; see <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O11096/embroidered-casket-edlin-martha/>.
- ⁹⁶ N.H., *Ladies Dictionary*, 419.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., 418-420.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., 476.
- ⁹⁹ Thornton, *Authentic Decor*, 36.
- ¹⁰⁰ Brooks, Feller and Holdsworth, *Feller: Needlework Collection*, 59.
- ¹⁰¹ Letter, Shrewsbury to Cecil, 13 March 1596. *Calendar of State Papers, Scotland*, 2, 632.
- ¹⁰² Clifford, *Diaries of Lady Clifford*, 84-85
- ¹⁰³ Darley, *John Evelyn*. 41.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 95
- ¹⁰⁵ Wroth, *Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, 102.
- ¹⁰⁶ Phelan, *Point of the Needle*, 17.
- ¹⁰⁷ Marshall, *Duchess Anne*, 252.
- ¹⁰⁸ Edmond Marmion, *An English Lady's Bedchamber*. Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.
- ¹⁰⁹ Hamling, *Decorating the “Godly” Household*.
- ¹¹⁰ See note 75.
- ¹¹¹ This panel could be either professional or domestic work; Nottingham Castle Museum, CT3.18.
- ¹¹² Brooks and O’Connor, ““In needle works there doth great knowledge rest””, 237-240.
- ¹¹³ Robert Hooke published *Micrographia: or some Physiological Descriptions of Minute Bodies made by Magnifying Glasses* in 1665. Books with images of insects which were used as design sources were available throughout the century; for example, Thomas Johnson’s *A Book of Beast, Birds, Flowers, Shrub, Fliers & Wormes* (1630), and John Overton’s *A new and perfect Book of Beasts, Flowers, Fruits, Butterflies and other Vermine. Exactly drawn of life and naturall by W. Hollar* (1674).

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- ¹¹⁴ MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, 37.
- ¹¹⁵ Possibly by the Dutch cabinet-maker Pierre Golle (1620-1684); The Geffrye Museum, London, 46/1979, 1652.
- ¹¹⁶ Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, 37.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., unpaginated (Preface).
- ¹¹⁸ Metropolitan Museum of Art, 64.101.1337.
- ¹¹⁹ Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantianum*, 20 and 36; Thomas de Critz (attrib.) *Portrait of John Tradescant the Younger with Roger Friend*, 1645. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1685 A f. 50.
- ¹²⁰ Korallenkabinett (1550-1660), Sammlungen Schloss Ambras, PA 963; *Die Entdeckung der Nature*, 267-268.
- ¹²¹ Hyde, "Curiosity and Flowers", 35-42.
- ¹²² Parkinson, *Paradisi in Sole*, 14.
- ¹²³ For example, *Solomon and Sheba*, Ashmolean Museum, WA1994.142. See Alayrac-Fielding, "From the Curious to the 'Artinatural'".
- ¹²⁴ Van de Roemer, "Redressing the Balance."
- ¹²⁵ Woldbye, "Scharloth's curious cabinet."
- ¹²⁶ Broomhall and Spinks argued that late seventeenth to early eighteenth century dolls houses in the Low Counties may be seen as women's domestic "cabinets of curiosity"; Broomhall and Spinks, 99.
- ¹²⁷ Feller Donation, Ashmolean Museum; see Brooks, Feller and Holdsworth, *Feller: Needlework Collection*, 68-71.
- ¹²⁸ The print is marked "Sold by John Overton at the White Horse in"; Metropolitan Museum of Art, 64.101.1335.
- ¹²⁹ For the use of mirrors in reflecting images in a room, see Gilman, *The Curious Perspective*, 46.
- ¹³⁰ Brook, *Vermeer's Hat*, 42-45.
- ¹³¹ *Officer and Laughing Girl* (c.1657), Frick Collection, New York, 1911.1.127.
- ¹³² For example, *Esther and Ahasuerus* (Ashmolean Museum) and *The Judgement of Paris* (Ashmolean Museum); Brooks, Feller and Holdsworth, *Feller: Needlework Collection*, 46-47 and 64-67.
- ¹³³ Jarö, "Gold embroidery," 51.
- ¹³⁴ Brown, *Genesis of the United States*, 2, 1032.
- ¹³⁵ Darley, *John Evelyn*, 28-29, 49.
- ¹³⁶ Brooks, Feller and Holdsworth, *Feller: Needlework Collection*, 72-75.
- ¹³⁷ These figures may derive from prints by Wither, published by William Marshal and later Peter Stent; see Brooke, *Catalogue of Embroideries*, 193-194.
- ¹³⁸ Aurelia, "Novel the Second," 29.
- ¹³⁹ See note 47.
- ¹⁴⁰ Susanna Perwich (1636-1661) was a renowned musician and mathematician who taught in her parents' school. After her death, her relation John Batchiler (c.1615-1674) wrote a memorial poem; Batchiler, *The Virgins Pattern*, 54.
- ¹⁴¹ For the social agency of artefacts, that is 'where [a thing] stands in a network of social relations', see Gell, *Art and Agency*, 123 and for a critique of this model, see Layton, "Art and Agency."
- ¹⁴² See Note 47.

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